

If the church were Christian, reconciliation would be valued over judgment.

I've been thinking about reconciliation this week. I hadn't intended to. The week got off to a good start. I was at peace with the world. I was slightly annoyed with a lady who had overcharged me at Arby's, but I was getting over it. So on Monday, when I began thinking about reconciliation, I felt very good about it and considered myself a fine example of Christian maturity. Then on Tuesday, someone did something that really annoyed me. On Wednesday, I wanted them fired. On Thursday, I wanted them jailed. And by Friday, I wanted them killed. That's me, zero to capital punishment in about four days. Yesterday, I felt embarrassed for being so angry.

The thing is, the people who made me angry didn't even intend to. They were just doing the kind of things they do, being who they are, which can be annoying, but probably isn't intentional. They didn't say, "Let's do something to drive Phil crazy." But I responded as if they had, and worked myself into a frenzy. The weird thing is, they're people I should be close to. But then isn't that often the case?

I remember when we were in an arm's race with the Soviet Union back in the 1980's. Mikhail Gorbachev had that purpley birthmark on his head that looked like Italy and everyone thought he was the Antichrist and that we were going to die in a nuclear holocaust. I got all worked up and marched in demonstrations, and wrote letters to my congressmen urging them to make peace with people who lived 4,000 miles, but I would barely speak to the people next door because their dog kept me up all night. I'm really good at being reconciled with people 4,000 miles, it's my neighbors I have problems with.

Am I the only one with this problem?

I knew a family where the parents were estranged from one of their adult daughters. Several years before, the daughter and her sister had quarreled, the parents had refused to take sides, advising their grown children to work out their differences peaceably and maturely. The daughter felt betrayed and resolved never to speak to her parents again. Then she became terminally ill, and though the doctors tried to save her life, they were unsuccessful and she died. Before she passed away, she left instructions that her parents and siblings were forbidden from sitting in the family section at her funeral. This was her last shot in their battle.

I had met with the daughter, urging her to be reconciled to her family, but she refused. The parents had made many overtures, trying to visit their daughter, but had been turned away at the door. The day of the funeral, the mother and father drove to the funeral home, slipped in at the last moment, took seats at the back, where they sat quietly, mourning not only the death of their daughter, but the death of their relationship.

Several months after the funeral, I saw the mother and father. They were still reeling from their daughter's death. They felt guilty and sad and hurt. They wondered if they should have apologized, though I don't know what they could have apologized for. But here they were, these wonderful, gracious people who got along so well with everyone except the one person they most wanted to.

Think of the skirmishes in the Bible. Which of them do we remember? Not the battles between nations. Who can even remember those nations? The Amalekites? The Amorites? Who can remember? No, what we remember is Brother Cain slaying Brother Abel. Noah cursing his son Ham. The strife between Abraham and Lot. Jacob cheating Esau of his birthright, and Esau plotting his murder. Laban tricking his son-in-law Jacob. Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers. Judas betraying Jesus. The splintered friendship of Barnabas and Paul.

It is those with whom we are closest who test our mercies the most. Perhaps because we expect so much of those we love that any failure or lapse on their part hurts us most deeply. When I went to visit the dying daughter, she spoke of betrayal, that she'd always thought she could count on her parents and they'd let her down. When I pointed out that she was asking them to choose between their children, it made no difference. So judgment was passed, the opportunity for reconciliation past.

Let's think for a moment about judgment and its prevalence in the church. What is judgment but our decision that someone or something is so beyond redemption we must cut ourselves off from them. There is a finality to judgment, a conclusiveness, and it pervades the Christian faith. If you eat a piece of fruit, you are cast out of the garden, forever. If you live to be eighty-five, but are mean and selfish and cruel, you'll go to hell and suffer, not just for eighty-five years, but forever. If you fail to believe the right thing, God will cast you out, forever. When I spoke with the daughter, she said, "I will never forgive my parents. Never." There is a sad finality to judgment. I will never forgive. I will never speak to them. I will never love them.

One reason judgment is so common in our culture is because it is so common in our religion.

But what is reconciliation? If judgment is the door forever barred, reconciliation is the open door. Reconciliation remember that circumstances can change, people can grow, priorities and values can shift.

When I was a teenager I dated a girl for almost three years. When we broke up, she began dating my good friend, and I grew so jealous I treated both of them rudely. A few years later, they married. But for many years we didn't talk to one another. Because we had been close, the fracture in our relationship was especially painful. I knew the breach had been my fault, but was too immature to apologize. Fortunately, they never closed the door, and when I returned to my hometown, our friendship was restored. Today, we're close. But only because they valued reconciliation over judgment.

Judgment says, "Never."

Reconciliation says, "This situation is difficult, this relationship is painful, but insofar as it depends upon me, I will be gracious."

This is not an invitation to be a punching bag. Sometimes for our own safety, we must leave a situation or a relationship. But even as we do that, we hope for transformation and good will.

I was talking with a minister not long ago who told me an interesting story. A couple in her church were divorcing. Not wanting to make a difficult situation worse, they thought since the church had married them, the church could divorce them.

I said, "That's odd."

The minister said, "I thought so, too. Then I thought how we celebrate life, and we help people cope with death. Why can't we celebrate marriage and also help people cope with its end?"

"So what happened?"

"Well, this couple came before the church and told us about their divorce, pledged to never be hateful or mean to one another, asked us not to take sides, wished one another every happiness and blessing in life, then we had a pitch-in."

I asked the minister, "How'd it work out?"

"Better than I thought," she said.

"Are they going to get back together?" I asked.

"No, the marriage is over. But now it appears they're not going to spend the rest of their lives being angry with one another."

I promise you, I promise you, I promise you, you will have broken relationships in your life. People you love deeply will hurt you deeply. We can respond one of two ways: We can say "Never. You are lost to me. We are done." Or we can say, "I wish you the best. May every blessing in life be yours." One action closes a heart, the other action opens it.